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The questions of dramatic unity and comedy in the Merchant's Tale

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THE QUESTIONS OF DRAMATIC UNITY AND COMEDY IN THE MERCHANT'S TALE

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Abstract

The greater portion of the thesis attempts to uphold the Merchant's Tale as a dramatic unit, appropriate to its teller and unified by the Merchant's consistently bitter attitude. The recent critical investigations of Professors Bronson and Jordan make such a defense necessary. Both men feel we should read the tale apart from any consideration of its teller for several reasons. First, the tale is uniquely un-Chaucerian in its bitter overtones; if we were to separate the tale from its teller, they believe the tale would lose its bitterness. Secondly, in agreement with the earlier research of Baugh and Manly, they believe the tale was originally intended for a clerical pilgrim and that Chaucer, in giving the tale to the Merchant, did not make the tale appropriate to its new teller. Finally, they find the tale too disparate in mode, style, and tone to characterize any single narrator-pilgrim; consequently, the unity which the tale achieves is mechanical, not organic, one based on the artistic juxtaposition of disparate elements for comic effect rather than on dramatic propriety.

The refutation of this position begins with proof of the appropriateness of the tale to its teller. Textual and logical considerations indicate the tale was initially written for a layman and that the tale remains bitter with or without a Merchant narrator. Moreover, Chaucer's careful revision of the link between the Clerk's and Merchant's Tales reveals that he was linking these tales more closely

in the dramatic context of a marriage discussion. Finally, the many debased parallels between the Merchant's Tale and the other tales of Kittredge's marriage group are totally consonant with the Merchant's embittered attitude expressed in his prologue.

The second portion of the refutation answers the accusation of disunity. The first section of the tale is not self-contained and innocently rhetorical; it is filled with dramatic irony and holds a place in the narrative as January's self-revelation. The second or "courtly" section of the tale, contrary to Jordan's belief, does not shift greatly in tone and does not demand a separate literary speaker. The Pluto-Proserpine episode is not self-contained, but is integrally linked, both structurally and thematically, to the narrative as a mirror image of the relationship between January and May. Finally, the fabliau conclusion remains consistent with the attitude of the bitter Merchant in terms of its tone and its relationship to the progress of the narrative.

The final section of the thesis concerns the supposedly un-Chaucerian bitterness of the tale and concludes that Chaucer manages, by means of the technique of caricature, to present a tale narrated by a bitter man which does not elicit a serious response from the reader, but rather a comic one.

Several recent critics feel that we should read Chaucer's Merchant's Tale apart from any consideration of its teller and with the realization that its unity is not developmental or organic, but rather a unity based on the principle of artistic juxtaposition of disparate elements.[1] The tale is Chaucer's, not the Merchant's; a rhetorical tour de force, not a characterization of any one narrator-pilgrim. Such a digression from the traditional dramatic reading of the tale stems from a series of difficulties previous Chaucerians have discovered. For one thing, the Merchant's Tale is considered unique in its bitterness, not at all characteristic of gentle, tolerant Chaucer.[2] Professors Bronson and Jordan find this fact highly disturbing; but their anxiety becomes outright panic when they realize

> "that in approximately half of the more complete MSS of the Canterbury Tales, there is no Merchant's Prologue. The Merchant's Tale comes between the Squire's Tale and that of the Wife of Bath. It must, therefore, have been known to many in Chaucer's day and later without the explosive charge [of the Merchant's personal bitterness]; and it is an unforced assumption that the Prologue and the Tale were composed at different times."[3]

Some earlier critics, proceeding on such manuscript evidence and on textual and tonal problems within the tale itself, concluded that the tale was originally intended for a clerical teller.[4] Although Bronson and

Jordan do not believe that the tale was meant for a clerical teller, both agree that the earlier research of Professors Manly and Baugh effectively indicates that the tale existed apart from its present context. Apparently when Chaucer decided to give the tale to the Merchant, he inserted the Merchant's Prologue, but did not labor to integrate the tale and teller and did not realize what a change in tone he had effected by the assignment of the tale to the Merchant. To Jordan at least, such revision, damning as it may sound, is not artistically inadequate. As he puts it:

> "it makes no difference which pilgrim /Monk, Friar, or Merchant/ one wishes to assign to the tale. None will fit, for the tale does not 'characterize' a single, unified pilgrim personality. The basis of Chaucer's art is not the so-called dramatic principle, but rather an aesthetic principle which we are just beginning to understand."[5]

Though such an approach to the Merchant's Tale seems harmless enough on the surface, ultimately justifying Chaucer's genius by revealing how the disparate elements in the tale play against each other for comic effect; in actuality, it accuses Chaucer of poor craftmanship and immaturity as an artist. When reduced to basic statement, the implication must be that Chaucer, in the midst of a series of tales whose narrators are closely related to their respective tales, chose a narrator for the Merchant's Tale who has no logical reason or context for his tale. If

Chaucer wanted a non-dramatic framework for the tales, if his artistic methods were essentially non-dramatic, then why did he place the tales in a dramatic context? My purpose, then, in this paper is to refute these critics, showing that the Merchant speaks appropriately in a dramatic context and unifies his tale by his consistently bitter attitude. Once the problems of dramatic propriety and unity have been discussed, the remainder of the paper will explore more generically the basis of Chaucer's comic vision in the tale; for, at least in part, Jordan's mistaken identification of the nature of the comedy in the tale legislates his "new," rhetorical approach to it.

It would be well to begin the consideration of the problems with a treatment of the teller and his relationship to the tale; for both Bronson and Jordan use the evidence against a Merchant narrator as a springboard for their own discussions of the unity and tone of the tale. Though several commentators have argued that the tale was not originally intended for the Merchant, Professor Baugh remarks at the most length and with the most textual support. I will consider his statement.[6] Baugh correctly sees a break in the plot action at E1267, and he also correctly identifies the speaker of the next one hundred and twenty-five lines as the Merchant, not January. However, he does not feel that the interpolated praise of marriage is spoken ironically. "In the passage itself

there is no hint that the speaker has his tongue in cheek. . . . Whatever irony is to be seen in the passage under consideration results from the situation in which these lines are spoken, not from the nature of the ideas expressed or the form of expression."[7] The Merchant is inconsistent, Baugh argues; for he is bitter about marriage in his prologue and straightforward in his praise of marriage in the encomium. It is only by reason of what we know of the Merchant and his sufferings from his prologue that the encomium becomes anything else than "a sincere defense of the institution . . . the discourse of a preacher expounding to a popular audience one of the sacraments of the church."[8] Moreover, the speaker's acquaintance with the Bible and other "authorities," coupled with his disparagement of the lay status in such phrases as "thise fooles that been seculeer" (E1251) and "I speke of folk in seculer estaat" (E1322) clearly set the speaker off from those to whom his generalizations apply.

Once Professor Baugh has shown, to his own satisfaction at least, that the speaker is a cleric, not the Merchant, he sets out to find an appropriate clerical teller for this ribald tale. He quickly eliminates, and obviously so, all the clerical pilgrims but the Pardoner and the Friar. Either could tell the tale; but, he argues, there is no reason why Chaucer would have taken the story of

January from the Pardoner only to give him a story of a similar type. Apparently the tale was originally intended for the Friar. Why then did Chaucer take the story from the Friar? Proceeding on Carleton Brown's theory that the Merchant's Tale was written before the Wife of Bath's Prologue, Baugh conjectures that Chaucer conceived the idea of enlivening the human drama with a quarrel between the Summoner and the Friar, so he gave the Friar a new tale and the Friar's original tale to the Merchant.

Several important arguments disprove Baugh's interpretation (or for that matter, any other argument favoring a clerical teller). Germaine Dempster has shown that certain lines in the encomium are patently ironic:[9]

> . . . .drede not if pleynly speke I shal,
> A wyf wol laste, and in thyn hous endure,
> Wel lenger than thee list, paraventure.
> (E1316-18)

It is certainly difficult to justify such an outburst in the midst of a sincere glorification of marriage. Miss Dempster finds it "seems even more hopeless to try to reconcile a sincere praise of marriage with the sustained and unflinching attack upon the institution in the story proper."[10] Certainly the fabliau jest and even the discussion of marriage, in which the only reasonable man attacks the institution, do not consistently characterize the honest advocate of wedlock in the encomium.

Moreover in the

> parenthetical commentary itself, the teller, by his emphasis on definite features in his praise of marriage, especially the goodness and fidelity of women, gives us more than a hint of what is in store for January. In . . . the lines on wives' ready obedience, for instance--we recall May's compliance with January's wish that she go and do "disport" to Damian--or those on their good care of sick husbands which half announce the cure of January's blindness through the good offices of May. 11

Such foreshadowing reveals more than the simple irony of an embittered narrator. Though the speaker of the encomium is clearly the teller of the tale, the smooth transition back to the story in E1393-94 indicates that the praise of marriage which has preceded functions as the teller's phrasing of January's thoughts as well as his own ironical thrust at the "ful greet sacrement."[12] Thus the foreshadowing has very nearly the effect of dramatic irony as well.

Mrs. Dempster also questions Baugh's contention that the hundred or so lines in question are a "kind of sermon." Such a reading depends, first of all, on the assumption that the speaker is a cleric, as indicated by the references in the text to "seculeer." She finds nothing in the allusions to seculars which speaks against their being written for a layman; and "indeed the first of them--'as doon thise fooles that been seculeer'--would be unaccountably uncivil in the mouth of an ecclesiastic . . . addressing laymen as well as clerics."[13] Professor McGalliard concurs;[14] and in a comparison of

this section of the Merchant's Tale with its source, the Miroir de Mariage, finds that the Miroir uses the word "seculier" repeatedly to contrast the ideal spiritual marriage to the merely temporal one. Répertoire de Science, the layman speaker of the Miroir at this point, admonishes Franc Vouloir, January's counterpart, not only not to marry but to enter a cloister. The inference is that Chaucer borrowed the term "seculier" from the Miroir and gave it to his Merchant who used it only to distinguish January from those who could live up to a spiritual marriage. The references do not in any way indicate a clerical speaker.[15]

Moreover, the assumption that the narrator is a cleric is not only unnecessary but improbable in view of the fact that the main emphasis of the "sermon" is not on "the Christian character of the marriage bond, . . . but on the practical advantages of it--nearly all very practical indeed."[16] The references to the Bible, Seneca, Cato, and the use of exempla give no indication of the speaker's status. Everyone knew the Bible in the fourteenth century, the Miller and Manciple both refer to Cato and Seneca,[17] and the use of exempla appears again and again in tales written for laymen.[18]

Finally it is unlikely that the Friar, presented in the General Prologue as a selfish sensualist, could have such a keen interest in morality. "That this interest should center on marriage would make the piece even more

inappropriate to our Friar, whose tolerant or rather indifferent attitude toward the institution was clearly indicated in the General Prologue."[19]

Given these facts, only the perverse would deny that the tale is and always was intended for the Merchant. After all, prologue or no, the tale is listed as his in all the manuscripts; and, as we have seen, there is no legitimate reason to quarrel with the assignment of the tale to him. However, one argument articulated by Professor Baugh, derived ultimately from Carleton Brown, and used by Jordan and Bronson in building their arguments, remains to be answered. Baugh points to the position of the Merchant's Tale before that of the Wife of Bath in many of the manuscripts as evidence for an earlier intention of the poet as well as of a date of composition previous to that of the Wife of Bath's Prologue.[20] In the first place, it is ridiculous to base an argument for the priority of composition on the position in the framework; more important, though, is the fact that the "arrangement [of the tales] even in the best manuscript (Ellesmere) is secondary, not Chaucerian."[21] The varying arrangements of the tales in the manuscripts are only the solutions adopted by scribes who apparently had no other guidance than the internal evidence in the tales and links.[22] Consideration of such evidence reveals that the Merchant's Tale definitely follows directly upon the

Clerk's Envoy and answers the Clerk in a dramatic way, as indicated by both the Merchant's Prologue and his tale.[23] How well it fits that context is, of course, a different question; but placing the tale in any other context for whatever reasons is irrelevant and worthlessly confusing. We cannot then, as Bronson and Jordan propose, "erase from our minds . . . all traces of whatever we have learned from the Merchant's Prologue,"[24] in order to understand the spirit in which the tale was written. We must accept the tale and its prologue in their present positions and continue our investigation from that point.

As a matter of fact, we must keep the Merchant's Prologue (as well as the Clerk's Envoy) in the forefront of our minds as we discuss the Merchant's Tale and its teller in a dramatic framework; for Chaucer, by revising the inter-tale materials, obviously intended to link the tales more closely in a dramatic context. There is considerable internal evidence of revision in the link between the Clerk's Tale proper and the Merchant's Tale. In some of the best manuscripts, including the Ellesmere, some words of the Host are inserted after the Clerk's Envoy. The use of a portion of this passage at another point in the Canterbury Tales (B3081ff.) is evidence both for its authenticity as Chaucerian composition and for its cancellation as a link between the stories of the Clerk and the Merchant.[25] Apparently an earlier version of the

Clerk's Tale, ending with E1162 or E1169, thus excluding the Wife of Bath stanza and Envoy, existed earlier in Chaucer's career. The Host's comments must have ended this earlier version, for they are superfluous in their present location after the Envoy. The Host's remarks interrupt a perfectly smooth transition between the Envoy ending "wepe, and wrynge, and waille!" and the Merchant's defeated echo of that line in the first line of his prologue.[26] It is logical, then, to assume that Chaucer added the reference to the Wife of Bath, the ironic praise of domineering women, as well as the comparison of Griselda's patience with the Merchant's wife's cruelty to the later version and intended the cancellation of the Host's stanza.[27]

Such changes indicate several intentions. Most generally, they reveal that Chaucer was focusing attention on the dramatic interplay of three very different pilgrims on the question of marriage. More important for our present purposes, however, is the fact that the changes, especially the Merchant's comparison of Griselda and his recent bride and his echo of the last line of the Envoy, reveal a technique of the Merchant's that heightens the dramatic contrast between the two tales. The first line of the Merchant's Prologue is not the only occasion on which he parrots the Clerk or his tale. The hero of the Merchant's Tale is, as was Walter, a knight

of Lombardy. Both men are self-indulgent before and after marriage; both are demanding of their wives. January, like Walter, gains a wife who is extremely "obedient." In terms of plot development, both men begin as "lusty bachelers," marry only after some sort of dialogue with others about the matter, and finally realize the "obedience" of their respective brides, though with vastly different results. Finally, it is quite possible, as one commentator believes, that the encomium on marriage is a conscious effort on the part of the Merchant to imitate the sophisticated irony of the Clerk's Envoy.[28]

However, nearly all of these parallels are debased by means of the Merchant's careful use of ironic detail for contrast. Though Walter is "A faire persone, and strong, and yong of age," his counterpart is an incredibly old dotard; "January's 'sixty year of age' might be a good decade more if Chaucer were writing now: the Middle Ages deflated the purchasing power of advancing years."[29] By virtue of this fact, January's protestations of youthful vigor become a parody when contrasted with the simple statement of Walter's youth and strength. Moreover, though Walter may be self-indulgent, he believes that self-indulgence is only feasible in the freedom of bachelorhood; only when begged by his subjects does he bow to their practical considerations and accept the

marriage yoke. January, however, does not fear the inevitable exchange of freedom for responsibility, but rather fears that the freedom and self-indulgence of the married state will forfeit his eternal reward. Even when encouraged, Walter is hesitant to marry; January wishes to marry even when he is advised against it. Though both January and Walter are about to marry, there is a considerable disparity between their reasons for their respective choices. Walter

> . . . noght with wantown lookyng of folye
> His eyen caste on hire, but in sad wyse
> Upon hir chiere he wolde hym ofte avyse,
> (E236-38)

but January merely lusts for May:

> But in his herte he gan hire to manace.
> That he that nyght in armes wolde hire streyne
> Harder than evere Parys dide Eleyne.
> (E1752-55)

Finally, while Griselda's obedience leads her to saint-like constancy, May's "obedience" leads her to inconstancy at the drop of a love note. The result of the Merchant's methods is obvious. The use of such debased parallelism serves to parody, in the Merchant's uniquely bitter way, the views of the Clerk on marriage and its possibilities of success.

The Merchant employs a similar technique with regard to the Wife of Bath and her tale, but to somewhat different effect. Years ago Kittredge showed that the Merchant has the Wife of Bath and her tale in mind when telling his

tale.[30] Not only does he allow one of his characters to mention the Wife and her tale in flagrant violation of dramatic propriety; but he imports Proserpina, an obvious surrogate for the Wife of Bath, to preach some of Alice's very doctrines, doctrines which will save May from the wrath of her husband as they saved Alice from hers.[31] The Merchant mimics many of the Wife's themes and even some of her phrases. The identical disavowal of any desire for celibacy made by the Wife reappears in the mouth of January.[32] The setting of the Wife of Bath's Tale, the land of "fayerye," reappears in the Merchant's Tale; and interestingly enough the Wife's double, Proserpina, rules that land. Justinus echoes the Wife's notion that a wife may be her husband's purgatory.[33]

The presence of such straightforward mimicry and even direct reference indicates that the Merchant agrees with the picture of marriage drawn by Alice in her prologue. In this case, however, there does not seem to be any attempt to qualify or contradict. It is interesting to note, however, that though both Alice and the Merchant agree about the nature of married life, their respective attitudes toward that institution differ radically. The Wife would obviously like to marry a sixth time; the Merchant would forego the pleasure after his single, two-month experience.

The parallelisms apparent among the three tales

indicate several important conclusions. The results of the Merchant's mimetic practices are totally consonant with his embittered attitude toward marriage. Chaucer has not merely superimposed a bitter prologue on a basically innocuous story. Rather the many structural parallels between the tale itself and that of the Clerk reveal a cynical attitude toward the Clerk's views, prologue or not. The two tales are definitely a contrasting pair. The references and parallels to the Wife of Bath's Tale and her prologue, again apart from any consideration of the Merchant's Prologue, indicate that the Merchant's Tale is subsequent,[34] and that the Merchant, by the very structure and technique of his tale, is dramatically involved in some sort of discussion of marriage, even though he never really raises the question of sovereignty.[35]

In a very complicated fashion we have seen that the internal evidence and links indicate that the Merchant's Tale belongs in the position it holds in the best manuscripts, between the tales of the Clerk and the Squire. Chaucer has carefully revised the link between the Clerk's Tale and that of the Merchant to join them more closely. He has been careful to integrate the tales of the traditional and dramatic marriage group in a structural as well as thematic interdependence. Finally, we have seen that the Merchant's Tale, viewed apart from its prologue, reveals its narrator's cynical and bitter tone, one

appropriate to the Merchant of the prologue.

Secure in this knowledge, it is time to leave consideration of the tale's place in the external framework of the Canterbury Tales and to come on to consider the internal problem of the tale's narrative and tonal unity. Professor Jordan believes the tale divides into "four more or less clearly defined divisions: the rhetorical debate on marriage (almost one half of the entire tale, to line 1699), the courtly romance centering in the garden, the episode of Pluto and Proserpina, and the raucous fabliau episode of the conclusion."[36] More importantly, he concludes that the divisions are disparate and "are many times dissonant with the attitude of bitter despair expressed in the prologue."[37]

According to Jordan the first half of the tale is a "lavish disquisition, superimposed upon the meager words and actions of January, serving to elucidate the anti-feminist theme of the tale." January is

> "much less central to the first half of the tale than to the second. While in the latter he at least takes a prominent part in the events, in the rhetorical half of the tale January though the instigator of the discussion, remains little more than a name put to a stock viewpoint which forms a part of the long and diffuse debate on wedlock. The imbalance between the kinds of role January plays in the two parts of the tale adds to its general disunity."[38]

The section is independent; its irony is purely local, concerned only with the humor of the passage, not with

the tale as a whole. It differs widely from the rest of the tale in both style and tone, for the speaker is actually the familiar Chaucercian innocent undertaking a glorification of marriage largely in rhetorical and moralistic terms. His arguments are largely self-defeating because derived from anti-feminism and used in defense of feminism. The tone elicited by such foolishness can only be amusement, not bitterness. The Merchant has no place here.

There are several problems with such a reading. In the first place, if the rhetorical debate on marriage is primarily involved with the anti-feminist theme of the tale, then why is it that the tale does not emphasize May's guilt? She is obviously of secondary importance in the narrative.[39] The emphasis is almost totally on January. Possibly Professor Jordan has overlooked something in his analysis. Perhaps there is good reason for the lack of narrative action in the first half of the tale; and perhaps Chaucer's method, contrary to Jordan's belief, does allow for the organic development of character, even though there is little external action. Professor Severs indicates the approach that is necessary to the first part of the tale for anyone seriously interested in the question of unity:

> "January is revealed to us as incurably fatuous, blind in mind as well as (later) in eyes, the type who believes only what

> he wants to believe regardless of the evidence on the other side. Chaucer of course is preparing us for January's action at the climax of the story, when May convinces him that he has not seen what he actually did see with his own eyes. . . . In a word, the early elaboration of his character renders plausible his later climactic action." 40

McGalliard also concludes that the poem is a narrative unit. In a comparison of the Merchant's Tale with the Miroir de Mariage (the source for the rhetorical section), McGalliard finds that the first part of the Merchant's Tale is not a "diffuse debate" as Jordan suggests. In fact, it is not a debate at all. Unlike Franc Vouloir, January's counterpart in the Miroir, the old knight has already made up his mind at the beginning of the tale that he will marry.[41] January only summons his counselors in order that they may hear the statement of his already fixed plans.

> And syn that ye han herd al myn entente,
> I prey yow to my wyl ye wole assente.
> (E1467-68)

If, then, the rhetorical half of the tale is not a debate, what is it? Further comparison with the Miroir indicates that it is essentially a characterization of January.[42] Franc Vouloir, after carefully considering and re-considering the arguments for and against marriage presented by his counselors, ultimately decides against it. Chaucer's January considers only one side of the question, the one he himself presents in his encomium, refuses even to listen to Justinus' opposition and insists on marriage.

The irrationality of January's approach to marriage is heightened by the facts that he is so old, demands such a young and beautiful wife, and has led such a life of dissipation previously--all three details original with Chaucer.[43] Chaucer also adds the unctious Placebo who tells January that any counselor who opposes his master is a fool. Placebo and his speech reiterate the fact that January is primarily self-deceived, for the old knight does not even reveal the slightest resentment at this obvious insult to his intelligence.[44]

The comparison then reveals that the rhetorical section, unlike the Miroir, delineates a man with an irrational fixation with marriage and a great capacity for self-deception. Viewed in the light of the subsequent action of the Merchant's Tale, the delineation indicates that Chaucer was anticipating the type of comedy so effectively used by Jonson and Molière. In such comedy, the hero's deviation from a rational norm is obvious throughout the action and characterization. The object of the comedy is not the reformation of the dupe, but rather, given his aberration and blindness, the delineation of his inevitable downfall.[45] Given this form of comedy, a form which meshes well with the view held by a great number of critics who believe January is primarily self-deceived,[46] then the tale holds together rather well as an organic, narrative unit. The rhetorical half of

the tale would be necessary to portray January's aberration, the justification for his end.

Once it has been shown that the introductory section of the tale is not merely a rhetorical debate with January as the naïve spokesman of an academic dispute, then the tone can no longer remain amused, as Jordan would have it. Senile lechery and irrationality are repulsive and ridiculous. The attitude is one of repulsion; the tone, one of bitterness. The end to which January comes leaves no room for doubt on this score.

One other argument against the bitter tone of the first section remains to be answered. As I have mentioned, Jordan believes that the irony of the rhetorical section is purely local. The first half of the tale

> "does not sustain the effect of dramatic irony. Try as we might to maintain the sense of an embittered husband pretending to praise matrimony--and we must envision a remarlably poised and subtle raconteur--the illusion disintegrates after twenty or thirty lines, about one-fifth of the way through the encomium. . . . The imagination is baffled by the effort to retain through this long and complex discourse on women and wedlock the sense of an embittered husband speaking in a frenzy of contempt and hatred."[47]

In the first place, Professor Jordan does not refute in any concrete way, here in the passage quoted or anywhere else in his article, the many critics who have found the section filled with dramatic irony.[48] He merely takes the opposite stand, hardly a satisfactory refutation in view

of the weight of evidence in favor of the presence of dramatic irony. More important, however, is the problem of definition. Close reading of the passage quoted indicates that Mr. Jordan does not really know what "dramatic irony" is.[49] Finally, one fails to comprehend why it is necessary to try to keep the "sense of an embittered husband" in mind as we read each and every line in each and every part of the tale in order to maintain the tonal unity of the piece. As we have seen, the Merchant occasionally externalizes his cynical attitude toward January and his folly; but, in the main, he has a tale to tell and the bitterness is implicit in the action and consequences of January's attitude toward marriage. In order to come to a conclusion, the Merchant must set up some situation and some premises for action. The concluding fact of January's sordid folly devolves from the premises presented in the beginning. Of course it is no accident that the premises which lead January to his folly are primarily involved with a naïve, optimistic attitude toward marriage. However, the fact remains that the Merchant had to set up these premises and set them up objectively in order that the conclusion would follow from the premises of the tale, not arbitrarily from the Merchant's disillusionment. Given January's naïve optimism and a Merchant teller we can safely enough anticipate the conclusion, but we should not expect the embittered

Merchant to be lurking behind every line when he has a tale to construct.

The second section of the tale, Jordan suggests, is a "courtly romance, suitably distorted and debased to accord with the anti-feminist and anti-romantic bias of the story." Yet the

> "speaker who describes the garden in the second half of the tale is a sophisticated literary man, one who is steeped in the courtly tradition: . . . no plea of sustained dramatic irony can persuade the imagination that this speaker is identical to the foolish encomiast of the beginning of the tale, or to the embittered husband of the Merchant's Prologue."[50]

It would be misleading and even inaccurate to deny that there is a change in style from the rhetorical and academic beginning to the debased romance in the second part of the tale; but the real question is whether such a change in style and convention actually discredits the narrative and tonal unity by demanding a different speaker. Both Professor Holman and Professor Schlauch agree that Chaucer is working with courtly convention in a potential romance situation. "If we give a simplified statement of the situation it might sound like a perfectly serious thirteenth century French romance."[51] However, Chaucer does not create a romance, but a distorted and debased burlesque of courtly love convention devolving in a fabliau conclusion, as Miss Schlauch and even Jordan himself suggest. Miss Schlauch believes that Chaucer does not merely invert

a literary convention for comic effect, but that he also implies serious social satire. As she points out, courtly love was an aristocratic pastime, dependent upon class distinction and limitation. The fact that Chaucer changed the potential romance into a fabliau, the very antithesis of the romance, springing largely from the bourgeoisie, not the aristocracy, indicates criticism of the aristocratic social prejudices.[52] Schlauch believes Chaucer became aware of the limitations of courtly love as an accurate index of the relations between and and woman.

I do not believe we can say with any certainty that Chaucer became disillusioned with courtly love, or even that he ever accepted it as anything more than a literary convention; but the fact remains that he did debase a potential romance situation in the Merchant's Tale and the distortion, as Schlauch implies, is perfectly appropriate to a bourgeois teller--say, the Merchant. It is not necessary, as Jordan would have it, that the teller be a "sophisticated literary man steeped in the courtly tradition." In other tales in the Canterbury group, when Chaucer intended in some way to satirize or transcend the conventions of courtly love, he always chose a bourgeois teller.[53] Possibly the ironic treatment of the courtly love situation is beyond the abilities of, say, the Miller or the Wife of Bath; but then again so is the handling of the courtly Knight's Tale beyond the capabilities of the

Knight of the pilgrimage. Nonetheless, it is perfectly appropriate to him. We must always remember that the pilgrimage and its members as storytellers are themselves conventions; consequently, we must half neglect that Chaucer the artist controls everything within the framework. As long as we remember this convention, the Merchant remains appropriate as the narrator of a debased romance. His cynicism about courtly love and its cult of the woman-goddess is consonant with the bitterness of his prologue. The attitude toward the character of January in the first half and toward the courtly situation in the second half of the tale is identical--disgust and bitterness. The Merchant unifies the tale by his consistently bitter attitude.[54] Moreover the tale is thematically unified by means of the continuity of emphasis on January's self-delusion, which, begun in mere rhetoric, now in the romance section carries into action.

Jordan's next objection is to the Pluto-Proserpina episode:

> "The fairy section is more damaging to a unitary hypothesis than any of the elements so far considered. . . . The squabble between Pluto and Proserpina is a self-contained episode (ll. 2219-2319) of delightfully humorous character. Its presence in the tale is justified by the relevance of its subject matter; but while we can say that it fits into the tale, we cannot say it develops the characterization of the Merchant."[55]

The fairy episode does much more than merely "fit

into" the subject matter of the tale. It is structurally and thematically integrated to the rest of the tale. Though the episode is admittedly a deus ex machina, it does not detract from the interest of the finale. In fact it heightens suspense by indicating the strange way in which things are to resolve themselves without showing exactly how.[56] Moreover, a comparison of the analogues reveals that the underworld deities are a Chaucerian addition. Why the substitution? Chaucer obviously wanted to establish Pluto and Proserpina as mirror images of January and May for structural balance.

The text of the Merchant's Tale (E2230-35) indicates that Chaucer was familiar with Claudian's account of the mythological tale of the rape of Proserpina and even encouraged his listeners and readers to read Claudian's account.[57] Comparison of Claudian and the Merchant's Tale reveals obvious parallelisms between Chaucer's January and Claudian's Pluto.[58] Pluto's lust motivates the rape; lust also prompts January's marriage to May.[59] Both men are very old and wish to marry for the same reasons--offspring and solace. Each has two brothers, and each receives aid from only one of them. In each case the "bride," the young and attractive symbol of fertility and new hope contrasts with her aged mate, who suggests only decay and death. May's affection for January is so forced that it would appear that she, as Proserpina, is raptus. Pluto and

Proserpina are indeed "divine counterparts" of January and May as Tatlock suggests, capable of providing a structurally integrated mirror image of the earthly situation.

Closely linked to this structural role as mirror image is the episode's thematic relationship to the tale. As Sedgewick suggests: "Pluto and Proserpina become deities fit to witness and direct another case of the erotic blindness of men and the 'passyng crueltee' of women: women are the same everywhere, the Merchant implies, whether in this world or the other."[60] However, the episode's thematic importance does not end with an exposition of woman's domination. As we have seen, much of the thematic emphasis of the tale involves January's blindness and self-delusion. The exposition of January's folly is not restricted to the rhetorical section, which we have analysed in this context, only to reappear in the fabliau conclusion. In the debased romance the Merchant draws attention to the old knight's lechery, his genuine indifference to May's feelings, his insane jealousy, his foolish argument, at least from the medieval, theological standpoint, that sexual abandonment is licit in marriage (E1836-41).[61] And even his solicitousness for the pain he is about to inflict on May in bed, in view of his age, is obviously the self-deception of a genuine fool. The effect of such characterization overshadows or at least balances May's guilt for infidelity. January is definitely

in the thematic spotlight from beginning to end. Viewed from this perspective, the characterization of Pluto is parallel proof of January's folly. As Karl P. Wentersdorf states:

> The third most noteworthy abduction element is, of course, the reference to the rape of Proserpina at the beginning of the Pluto episode. This story of a grim elderly man who lusts after an attractive young girl, carries her off to be his wife . . . is more than a parallel to the story of January. . . . in the classical legend, the death of nature in the winter of each year is the result of an original wrongdoing--Pluto's ravishment of Ceres' daughter. The effect which Pluto's deed had on nature throws light on the unnaturalness of his marriage; and this unnaturalness is acknowledged in Jove's decision that Proserpina be permitted to leave her husband for a few months every year. The Pluto episode, therefore, simultaneously emphasizes not only the inevitability of May's urge to be unfaithful to her husband but also, and this more importantly, the ultimate responsibility of January himself for his wife's infidelity, on account of the wrongness of the initial action--the 'ravishment' of May.[62]

The episode is more than merely a jab at women in the anti-feminist tradition, as Jordan would have us believe. It is as structurally integrated as a deus ex machina may be; and it throws light on the major theme of the work--the delineation of January's blind eroticism and self-deception, while it simultaneously suggests the universality of that theme.

Finally, as has been suggested earlier in a different context, the content of the Pluto episode is perfectly consistent with a Merchant speaker and does develop his

characterization, contrary to Jordan's suggestion. The wife's eventual domination, in this case Proserpina's, is exactly the Merchant's point. A belief in the reality of such domination, confirmed by his own experience, is what provoked his denial of the Clerk's view of wifely submission and partially motivated the Merchant's own tale. Moreover, the episode's structural and thematic links with the rest of the tale are consonant with the attitude of repulsion. The underlying mythological story is hardly any more appealing than that of January, though on the surface it is the lightest part of the tale.

Let us now turn to the conclusion of the tale. Jordan once again finds tonal disunity, especiallyin the narrator's interruptions of the action to apologize for his crudeness. "By shattering the fictional illusion at this most untimely moment, . . . the speaker draws attention to his own presence. It is not a presence to repel us by its frenzied expression of contempt and hatred. Far from savage, the speaker is gauche and obsequious." The lines in question:

> Ladyes, I prey yow that ye be nat wrooth;
> I kan nat glose, I am a rude man--
> And sodeynly anon this Damyan
> Gan pullen up the smok, and in he throng.
> (E2350-53)

and

> Up to the tree he caste his eyen two,
> And saugh that Damyan his wyf had dressed

> In swich manere it may nat been expressed,
> But if I wolde speke uncurteisly. . .
> (E2360-63)

do appear "gauche and obsequious"; I do not deny that Chaucer may have been having some fun with his Merchant by revealing his inconsistency, apologizing for crudeness with the full intention of proceeding in his crudeness. However, the speaker of these passages intended bitter irony. It is quite possible that the interruption at a key point in the narrative is merely a technique employed by the Merchant to juxtapose, perhaps even facetiously, his sensibility to crudeness (even of speech) with his heroine's decided lack of scruples with regard to action. Furthermore, is it reasonable to believe that a man, disillusioned by his own wife, capable of drawing such a brutal indictment of womanhood as May most certainly is, would worry about the sensibilities of the "Ladyes" in his audience? His second interruption indicates the same sort of technique. His apology here is for "uncurteis" language. It must be remembered that Damian and May are supposedly courtly lovers; there is no language in the convention capable of explaining such activity, the Merchant savagely implies. May certainly has not acted and is not acting "curteisly." Once again the conclusion can only be that the Merchant is savagely ironic, repulsed by the situation, and embittered.

We have at last come to the end of our consideration

of Professor Jordan's four narrative divisions of the Merchant's Tale. Close inspection has revealed that the various parts of the tale are not "diffuse and disparate"; but they are rather a series of interdependent parts fused into unity by the dominating influence of the delineation of the main theme, January's foolishness, and the Merchant's consistently bitter and cynical attitude toward all the characters, events, and institutions concerned with love. Only one objection remains to prevent the reassertion of the tale's dramatic unity.

Apart from any consideration of structural or genre divisions, Jordan finds the "tale as a whole is an extremely varied and discordant mixture of many of the voices which Chaucer habitually uses."[64] The voice, for example, of epic apostrophe in the address to Fortune:

> O sodeyn hap! o thou Fortune unstable!
> Lyk to the scorpion so deceyvable,
> That flatterest with thyn heed whan thou
> wolt stynge;
> Thy tayl is deeth, thurgh thyn envenymynge.
> O brotil joye! o sweete venym queynte!
> O monstre, that so subtilly kanst peynte
> Thy yiftes under hewe of stidefastnesse.
> (E2057-63)

Jordan sees irony behind the impassioned apostrophe; "but it does not originate in the savagery of a disillusioned Merchant-husband." Rather he sees comic irony in the "positioning of this eloquent outcry, amid the affairs of a silly old man and his inconsequential young wife."

George B. Pace, however, argues briefly but con-

vincingly that the apostrophe is bitter and thus appropriate to the Merchant.[65] The identification of Fortune and the scorpion in this passage is usually glossed as a reference to Fortune's treachery, for the scorpion presents a mild face and stings with its tale. But the scorpion has another connotation--sexuality; and it can be shown that Chaucer was aware of this connotation. In the medieval practice of astrological medicine, in which the signs of the zodiac correspond to various parts of the human anatomy, the province of the scorpion is the pudendum. Chaucer refers to this correlation in the manuscript to A Treatise on the Astrolabe. Moreover, in the theological practice of associating various sins with various animals, the scorpion symbolized lechery, because like the scorpion, the woman presented a mild face and stung with her tail. Chaucer makes reference to this correlation as well in the Parson's Tale (I850-55). Pace goes on to show that the sexual associations of the scorpion, and thus of Fortune, have relevance in this passage in the Merchant's Tale. There are unmistakable sexual puns in the words "tayle" and "queynte." The sexual puns continue in "brotil joy" and "sweete venym," which certainly do not literally refer to the sting of the scorpion which is neither sweet nor joyous. They demand, rather, a context at once pleasurable and dangerous. Obviously the context is lechery, and Fortune is the harlot.

What could be more appropriate for a man down on women from the very outset than the attribution of womanhood to something as fickle as Fortune? It is also quite appropriate that the Merchant should present January's physical blindness as a consequence of a lecherous encounter with Fortune, for it implies that his later metaphorical blindness may also be a result of lechery. If this last analogy may be stretching the point, then at least the intimation of lechery is consonant with the picture of January throughout the tale as a lecherous old fool.

Jordan singles out one other passage which is not, in rhetorical voice and tone, consonant with the so-called "bitter" voice of a Merchant narrator. He cites the "understated expression of sympathy for May as she awaits January's pleasure":

> He was al coltissh, ful of ragerye,
> And ful of jargon as a flekked pye.
> The slakke skyn aboute his nekke shaketh,
> Whil that he sang, so chaunteth he and craketh.
> But God woot what that May thoughte in hir herte,
> Whan she hym saugh up sittynge in his sherte,
> In his nyght-cappe, and with his nekke lene;
> She preyseth nat his pleyying worth a bene.
> (E1847-54)

Jordan characterizes the governing viewpoint in this passage as . . .

> "characteristically Chaucerian in its combination of detachment and compassion (neither quality, of course, is appropriate to the Merchant). The humor of this passage, . . . comes from the zest for detail and the unerring sense of contrast and timing." 66

Here again Jordan is critically unfair to the situation. The passage concentrates quite obviously and vividly on January's deluded sense of his sexual robustness, a prowess which he had earlier claimed in his conversation with Placebo and Justinus (E1457-66) but until now had not validated or disproved. The humor of the passage comes not so much from "contrast and timing" as it does from this one more instance of the deflation of a fool's pretensions. May is merely the device of deflation, not an object of sympathy. A reader can only sympathize with another human being who feels. The Merchant, or by extension, Chaucer, has been very careful to prevent May from becoming a human character and thus a potential object of sympathy. She has been delineated merely as the object of January's erotic fantasies, so much so, in fact, that the narrator does not even distinguish her in any way from the other young beauties who pass in procession through January's daydreams (E1594-98). Moreover, at this point in the narrative she has yet to utter her first word; and even here the Merchant is careful to screen her from view by providing her reaction to January's love-making at second hand. Aside from all this, the nature of her reaction--"She preyseth nat his pleyying worth a bene"--does not reveal a wealth of sensitivity and feeling and, for that reason, is hardly conducive to reader sympathy.

A look at Chaucer's dealings with the source for the section in which the passage occurs, Boccaccio's Ameto, only confirms the judgment against Jordan's position. As Tatlock mentions, Chaucer omits all the information which concerns the actions of the young girl's parents in forcing her to marry the rich, but senile lover.[67] In fact, Chaucer does not even state that May was an unwilling bride as her surrogate, Agapes, was, or have her complain as Agapes does. Finally, Chaucer "also avoids the first person point of view of Agapes in the Ameto, which would direct our attention and our sympathy to the lady in the case."[68] All the changes from the Ameto regarding the heroine indicate that Chaucer intended to divert attention and sympathy from May in order to focus on January's sexual braggadocio and its realistic deflation; such artistic changes are, of course, perfectly consonant with the narration and character of an embittered Merchant.[69]

Up until this point, we have considered all the specific objections Professor Jordan has raised concerning the tonal, structural, and stylistic unity of the Merchant's Tale and the appropriateness of the tale to its teller. From external considerations of the tale's place in the framework and from internal considerations of the relationships of various parts to the narrative and tonal whole, the only conclusion can be that Chaucer intended the tale for its present place in the dramatic framework and

succeeded in making the tale appropriate to its embittered teller. In short, the tale is a dramatic unit.

We might come on then to consider the more generic problems of the nature of the comic vision in the Merchant's Tale and, more specifically, the nature of the audience's reaction to the tale, considerations which first caused Professor Jordan to attempt to justify the tale on rhetorical rather than dramatic and structurally unified grounds.

Jordan comes closest to sound critical judgment when he concludes that the tale's effect is more involved with humor than the "repugnance" which the previous generation of scholars saw in it.[70] He is also correct in taking McGalliard to task for describing the characterization in the tale as that of "whole men" who "act and move and live in society . . . as husbands, fathers, brothers, citizens, heads of a household."[71] One must agree, with Tatlock, that the characterization here is "less subtle than in some of the tales, and is outlined in bold, black strokes."[72]

However, one cannot grant the further conclusions which Jordan derives from these perceptions. That January is more a personification than a person does not imply, as Jordan would have it, that the encomium is not a full and rich characterization of January; it only implies that the portrait focuses on one aspect of personality not on

a discursive picture of a man functioning in all his social relations and exhibiting the full complement of human responses. In the same way, that "Chaucer's method /in the encomium/ does not allow for the organic development of character through action," does not "invalidate at once any structural comparison with drama."[73] One only need look at the dramatic technique of soliloquy to disprove such an assertion.

And again, Jordan correctly asserts that Chaucer's narrative method "serves to distance us from the characters." We can agree, even enthusiastically, that such "techniques of distancing . . . preclude charges of callousness or cynicism."[74]

However, the safe distance from which we view the circumstances and outcome of the tale is not a product of intentional, rhetorical disunity or a non-dramatic view of the tale apart from its bitter narrator, but rather of dramatic techniques which we are about to investigate. In short, then, Jordan, in attempting to secure a respectable end, the rescue of the tale from the seriousness of response of earlier critics, makes use of misleading means of proof.

The uniqueness of the tale and its tone has ended in producing overstatement and confusion on both sides of the argument. The traditionalists, though they legitimately catalogue most of the artistic techniques of the tale,

strain to keep it within the bounds of a comic vision.

One senses the strain in Tatlock's confusing paradox.

> "One might feel half-ashamed of so greatly enjoying so merciless a tale, and might balk at prolonged analysis, if this did not end, as we shall see, in cheerfully detaching us from the prevailing mood."[75]

The explanation of how the conclusion succeeds in "cheerfully detaching" the reader is no less paradoxial.

> "The more its people alienate us from humanity, the nearer it draws us to their versatile and kindly creator in admiration and fellow-feeling. Therefore the last impression of the Merchant's Tale is repugnant. Cold makes us aware of warmth, and something purely acrid heightens the worth of his prevailing clemency."[76]

On the other hand, Bronson and Jordan do injustice to the ironic and dramatic devices of the tale and, consequently, find it quite easy to justify the tale as comedy. Naturally, the former position is preferable to the latter; for, even if the tale were as bitter as it has been described, one could not balk at such a deviation from the so-called Chaucerian norm of geniality. Any cynicism it might contain would not be an indication of the artist's state of mind, of his hatred of humanity. Rather it would be an artistic pose, no less a transformation and transcendence of human experience than is the sublimation and idealization in the Knight's Tale or Troilus and Criseyde. However, one does not really have to strain to justify the comic nature of the Merchant's Tale.

On both sides of the argument, the confusion stems from an inability to dissociate the two levels of narration consistently. As we have seen, the Merchant, emotionally involved and disillusioned with the institution of marriage, relates a tale about marriage whose outcome and tone can only be bitter. But beyond this interlocutor is the detached and objective artist who has created both the Merchant and January. Given the dramatic convention of the Canterbury Tales and more specifically the character of the Merchant, Chaucer kept the tale's humor less than genial and good-natured. However, it is unlikely that Chaucer intended his audience to share wholeheartedly the emotional cynicism of the Merchant narrator. It becomes clear from the Merchant's vow in his prologue, "Were I unbounden, also moot I thee! / I wolde nevere eft comen in the snare," that we are dealing here with a man who, in his own way, deviates from a rational norm as unqualifiedly as his creation does. The naïve January may myopically see marriage as an absolute good; but, with equal blindness, his creator dismisses the institution without reservation. Such a distortion precludes from the outset any real sympathy for the Merchant, detaches us from unqualified assent to his view of reality, and allows us to sit back, confident in our superiority, and enjoy the fireworks. The commonplace critical aphorism which distinguishes tragedy (or at

least, serious emotional involvement) from comedy in terms of perspective or distance applies beautifully in this case. For the recently married Merchant, involved at close range in the problems of wedlock, the situation is serious; his reaction, from the force of experience, can only be caustic and bitter. For the audience, fundamentally detached from the Merchant and the characters in the tale because of their deviation from a fully human normality, there can only be laughter. It is not, of course, the genial laughter of warm-hearted acceptance of the characters' humanity, but a derisive laughter bred of a careful, artistic control and exposition of the difference between the characters and their world and the viewer and his, a difference which serves to enthrone the viewer in his superiority to the characters and narrator of the tale. We do not become intimately involved with the characters, either by way of sympathy or repugnance, because we do not ultimately feel any real similarity between them and ourselves. The delineation of their follies and foibles, beyond which characterization in the tale never trespasses, is transparent, not fraught with human complexity. They are made for laughter. We do not really care about their fates because their world is not the infinitely modulated, moral world in which we live but one which conforms to its own simple, but bizarre logic. Such a comic perspective functions in perfect consonance with the Merchant's caustic

humor but does not allow the seriousness of response which the Merchant feels.

Chaucer undoubtedly foresaw that the only possible means to prevent the Merchant's bitterness from overwhelming the comic perspective lay in establishing distance between characters, including the narrator, and the reader; and he achieved such distance through the technique of caricature. Caricature, as the comic art of distortion, depends for its life upon the viewer's or reader's sense of superiority, the divergence between his normality and the character's one-dimensional aberration. Moreover, it depends upon its own world, its own logic; when distortion intrudes upon a normal world it ceases to be humorous and becomes despicable, or more often merely pathetic. For example, a bystander might be tempted to laughter by the sight of two or three excessively tall people walking along a street, or by an excessively tall person walking beside an excessively short person; but there is nothing humorous about the individual presence of an excessively tall person in a world of normality. Furthermore, even if the tall and the short persons remain divorced from a world of normality, the urge to laughter would be destroyed by the onlooker's intimacy with either or both of the individuals concerned. Whether Chaucer's sense of the requirements of this variety of humor was intuitive or more properly intellectual and artistic is a moot point, but that he succeeded

in fulfilling the requirements of caricature humor is beyond dispute. The success subsumes the Merchant's bitterness within the bounds of comic perspective.

Let us examine the three major characters for the sake of illustration of that success. Damian is little more than a two-dimensional stereotype of the chivalric lover. As Holman states:

> "Damien, the love-sick squire has been criticized as lacking interest or sympathy, but this feeling comes from the fact that Damien is so perfect an illustration of the courtly love lover that he loses individuality because of the conventional nature of all his reactions."[77]

Certainly there is little given to individualize or distinguish him, to make him fully human and thus to gain our emotional intimacy with him. He is not described except for the mention of his role as squire to January; he speaks only once, a two-line plea to May for courtly pity (E1942-43). But Professor Holman's assertion of Damian's conventionality cannot fully explain, as he believes, our lack of sympathy for the squire. Even as a conventional chivalric lover, when measured against January's obvious lecherous distortion, Damian would probably gain some sympathy. He fails to elicit any sympathy not because he is conventional, but because he is a debased parody of the conventional chivalric lover, a distortion of the stereotype even one step further removed from realistic human sympathy and intimacy.[78] As Holman suggests, Damian does

do all the typically courtly things a young lover should do: he falls in love immediately, is so enraptured that he thinks of nothing but his lady, pines away, writes complaints and lays as a means of communication with her, keeps his communication secret, is ennobled by the acceptance of his service, and consummates the adulterous love in proper courtly fashion.[79] Yet, his actions are not presented conventionally. For instance, no sooner has the Merchant described Damian's first paroxysm of feeling for May than he undercuts any emotional involvement the reader may begin to feel for the squire with the outburst:

> O perilous fyr, that in the bedstraw bredeth!
> O famulier foo, that his servyce bedeth!
> O servant traytour, false hoomly hewe,
> Lyk to the naddre in bosom sly untrewe,
> God shilde us alle from youre aqueyntaunce!
> (E1783-87)

Aside from whatever humor the passage has at the Merchant's expense for its overblown rhetoric and possibly personal application and in spite of the possibility that the Merchant is actually accusing January of his folly by ironically accusing January's squire of the burden of guilt, the passage, in its interruption of the dramatic illusion and in its choice of analogy, deflates with comic effect the conventional response of the courtly romance to the impulse to adultery. Courtly swooning and uncontrollable ravishment cannot help but gain here the suggestion they are the self-conscious techniques of the "traytour."

Moreover, it keynotes the narrator's reaction to the whole affair so that when not one hundred lines later the Merchant offers sympathy for Damian, the reader realizes it is tongue in cheek:

> Now wol I speke of woful Damyan,
> That langwissheth for love, as ye shul heere;
> Therfore I speke to hym in this manere:
> I seye, "O sely Damyan, allas!
> Andswere to my demaunde, as in this cas.
> How shaltow to thy lady, fresshe May,
> Telle thy wo? She wole alwey seye nay.
> Eek if thou speke, she wol thy wo biwreye.
> God be thyn helpe! I kan no bettre seye."
> (E1866-74)

Since Damian "langwissheth for love," the Merchant speaks to him in languishing terms. The mannered speech implies that the similar thoughts which must be going through Damian's mind are as easily and as much an affectation. They are merely a cloak of self-pity obscuring the inherent treachery of the act. There is certainly no genuine sympathy here; the reader's potential emotional involvement in Damian's plight is once again precluded. Further proof of this fact lies in the application which the lines have to the characterization of May. The reader already knows that May will accept Damian's service. "But there I lete hym wepe ynogh and pleyne, / Til fresshe May wol rewen on his peyne." (E1781-82) Consequently, "She wole alwey seye nay," becomes mock pessimism and sarcastically looks forward to May's immediate capitulation to Damian's wishes, an action which in its

immediacy deviates significantly from the courtly code. The mock solemnity simply does not allow the reader to share Damian's emotional situation; we remain at a distance.

In the same way, his quick recovery, narcissism, and deceitful servility, all revealed when Damian finds favor with May, prevent the reader's exuberant empathy with the squire and do read, as Tatlock maintains, "like a parody on Chaucer's earlier account of the ennobling effect on Troilus of his happy love."[80] The use of the words "privee" (E2105) and "pryvely" (E2121) to characterize Damian's courtly secrecy are likewise techniques, given May's earlier disposal of the squire's proposition, to debase the courtly convention and Damian's part in it. Finally, his crawling about the garden and grotesque consummation in the pear tree make the reader further question the ennobling effects of courtly love. Damian becomes an object of literally ridiculous laughter.

Throughout the tale Damian remains a two-dimensional caricature, a distortion. Implicit in the debased portrait and thoroughly appropriate to the bitter Merchant is the Chaucerian "distancing" technique. At no time, as we have seen, can we sympathize with him; nor are we truly repulsed by him. We cannot take him that seriously. He is, as January and May are, even over and above elements of parody, part of an artificial convention already one

remove, even in Chaucer's day, from any realistic world of moral judgment in which the reader existed. Parody of the artificial moral judgments of the courtly code certainly would not make him any more important an agent of moral statement. Moreover, one cannot be repulsed by an accessory to a crude kind of justice, the duping of a fool. He might be repulsive or repugnant if January were a kind, gentle, loving husband. He remains comic because he never touches the reader or the reader's world. The reader remains aloof in the pride in the superiority of his own human normality and watches distortion play upon distortion in a world not his own.

Unlike Damian, May has a counterpart in a source, Agapes in Boccaccio's Ameto. As we have seen in another context, Chaucer's alterations of Boccaccio's account de-emphasize May's importance and reader sympathy for her by avoiding the first person point of view, by neglecting to make May an unwilling bride, by providing her reaction to the love-making of January at second hand, not in her own words, and by making that reaction--"She preyseth nat his pleyying worth a bene"--a fairly insensitive one. Also, as was noted earlier, up until the reaction to the love-making, Chaucer was careful to keep May from becoming a fully human character, a potential object of reader empathy or sympathy. She has not as yet spoken her first word; the Merchant describes her only as "lyk the brighte

morwe of May, / Fulfild of alle beautee and plesaunce." (E1748-49) In the first part of the tale, she is merely a completely passive object of desire, relatively indistinguishable from the other beauties in January's fantasies.

Though May's role enlarges in the remainder of the tale, through the Merchant, Chaucer maintains the distance between character and reader which prevents sympathy on the one hand; and he avoids, on the other extreme, repugnance by the constant juxtaposition of May's distortion with January's, in effect by the creation of a world of distortion which never has any serious effect on us because it never impinges on real human value. For example, given the full scale delineation of January's senile lechery, one might sympathize with May. But the Merchant's presentation of May's immediate capitulation prevents such intimacy. Once May has made her decision, he comments:

> Lo, pitee renneth soone in gentil herte!
> Heere may ye se how excellent franchise
> In wommen is, whan they hem narwe avyse.
> Som tyrant is, as ther be many oon,
> That hath an herte as hard as any stoon,
> Which wolde han lat hym sterven in the place
> Wel rather than han graunted hym hire grace;
> And hem rejoysen in hire crueel pryde,
> And rekke nat to been an homycide.
> (E1986-94)

The non-courtly immediacy of her acceptance contrasts sharply with the courtly sentiments of the obviously

insincere praise. The mock sincerity can only cast doubt on the sincerity of May's courtly sentiments. The audience is effectively detached from emotional empathy for May's expression of emotion. In spite of her obvious distortion, however, one is not repulsed. In view of what we know about the effete Damian, the use of the word "homycide," to characterize his projected fate without May's favor brings ludicrous laughter. Moreover, May's expression of sympathy and the Merchant's mock praise immediately follow this description of January:

> Anon he preyde hire strepen hire al naked;
> He wolde of hire, he seyde, han som plesaunce,
> And seyde hir clothes dide hym encombraunce,
> And she obeyeth, be hire lief or looth.
> But lest that precious folk be with me wrooth,
> How that he wroghte, I dar nat to yow telle;
> Or wheither hire thoughte it paradys or helle.
> (E1958-64)

January obviously has not perceived May's earlier reaction to his love-making; in incredible imperception he continues in his sexual self-delusion. Consequently, when the Merchant comically hypothesizes whether May's infidelity was a result of "destynee or aventure, / Were it by influence or by nature, / Or constellacion," (E1967-69) we are humorously certain that it resulted from none of these reasons, but from the obvious sexual insufficiency of the deluded lecher. We are not affronted or morally repulsed by May's self-justifying rationalizations and her immediate capitulation. Rather we say of the pair of distortions, with comic satisfaction in the superiority

of normality, that they deserve each other.

The same sort of prevention of sympathy and juxtaposition of distortion occurs in the garden when May defends herself and womankind:

> "I am a gentil womman and no wenche.
> Why speke ye thus? but men been evere untrewe,
> And wommen have repreve of yow ay newe.
> Ye han noon oother contenance, I leeve,
> But speke to us of untrust and repreeve."
> And with that word she saugh wher Damyan
> Sat in the bussh, and coughen she bigan,
> And with hir fynger signes made she
> That Damyan sholde clymbe upon a tree.
> (E2202-10)

Obviously any sympathy for May's offended honor is destroyed by the explicit contradiction in action of what she professes in words. However, she does not become morally repugnant; Chaucer, in juxtaposing the same inconsistency between January's words and his actions just previous to this, does not allow us to pity him and thus despise her. We feel instead the comic appropriateness in May's besting him at his own game. We know from an earlier remark of the Merchant why January built his garden, "And thynges whiche that were nat doon abedde, / He in the gardyn parfourned hem and spedde." (E2051-52) Also, we have been aware throughout of his lechery and jealousy. Consequently, the speech which he makes in the garden before May betrays him does not become pathos, but is more nearly the calculated, insincere effort of a jealous old fool to appeal to his wife's emotions in order to achieve his real wishes--her faithfulness and sexual

enthusiasm.

> For Goddes sake, thenk how I thee chees,
> Noght for no coveitise, doutelees,
> But oonly for the love I had to thee.
> (E2165-67)
> That, whan that I considere youre beautee,
> And therwithal the unlikly elde of me,
> I may nat, certes, though I sholde dye,
> Forbere to been out of youre compaignye
> For verray love; this is withouten doute.
> (E2179-83)

These are January's rhetorical, misleading attempts to cloak respectively his lust and insane jealousy from what would be the righteous indignation of a faithful wife. We know from what precedes and follows these remarks in the tale that it is "coveitise," not love, which motivates January's actions; and we also know that he really does not think his old age "unlikly" (displeasing). His words, then, just as May's, belie his intentions. May merely teaches him a lesson in improved technique.[81]

Again a similar sort of juxtaposition occurs in the denouement. There is no danger of sympathy for May in the conclusion; she controls and manipulates the situation with expertise. However, there is here once again the problem of repugnance. For example, Germaine Dempster maintains:

> "the impression is not that of comedy. In the last few pages, what little sympathy the reader can feel has been enlisted on the side of January, so that all the bitterness and resentment stirred up against women in the first part of the tale come back to us."[82]

Mrs. Dempster overlooks one highly significant detail about

January only four lines from the conclusion of the tale in her reading of the ending, "And on hire wombe he stroketh hire ful softe." (E2414) In spite of the fact that the tale takes pains to emphasize the self-imposed folly of the old lecher, one still might be tempted to sympathize with him, as Dempster does, at the conclusion because he is primarily acted upon and because he is solicitous for his wife when he regains his sight. However, the above citation (E2414) is a crushing blow to such a reading. With it, the solicitation for May comes clearly into view as motivated by lust. Even here January blinds himself to his sexual insufficiency so obvious to May and reader alike throughout the tale. The line re-emphasizes the leading part that January's delusion, his distortion, has in his folly; the reader does not castigate May nor is he repelled by her. Rather the focus shifts to January. The reader recognizes the absolute nature of the old mah's delusion and can only admit, in derisive and frustrated laughter, that January deserves what he gets. May remains a comic caricature because, in spite of her transparent immorality, she never intrudes upon a world of fully human value and morals. She continues unpunished because she lives in a world with its own logic, one in which the reader laughs at the expense of all the characters because they are all distortions. The greater the distortion, the more the laughter, however; and May simply

cannot measure up to her husband's delusion.

It would seem that January could only grudgingly be termed a caricature because of the elaborate and extensive characterization of him throughout the tale. As a matter of fact, however, the delineation is one of depth not breadth. There is nothing in Chaucer's portrait which is not a logical extrapolation from the characteristics of the traditional senex amans character type. What we do learn about January only serves to make him a vivid representation of the type and to emphasize the distorted elements of caricature already inherent in it. From beginning to end January is too absolute a fool for any intimate, human response to him whether favorable or unfavorable. We have, in connection with the characterization of January, already explored Chaucer's alterations of the source for the first section of the tale. As we saw, Chaucer's changes uniformly tended to emphasize January's foolishness and self-delusion.[83] Chaucer set out to create an aberration. The absolutely blind favor with which the lecher looks upon the institution of marriage divorces him from truly human concern from the beginning. Naïveté only evokes human concern when it implies innocence; January's lecherous past, his willful denial of the sexual facts of old age, and his failure to respond to the common-sense advice offered by a friend deny innocence in him. The strength of his sudden fixation with licensed lechery

makes him ripe for derisive laughter from the outset.

Nor does anything subsequent to the encomium alter the nature of the reader's response. In discussing the characterization of May we touched upon two situations which might imply sympathy for January (his plea for faithfulness in the garden and his immediate concern for May when his eyesight is restored), only to find on close examination that sympathy is precluded by his own willful continuation in folly. Let us now examine some other passages which might be construed as expressions of January's humanity, for example, his consideration for May's sensitivity and delicacy when he fantasizes about the wedding night.

> But nathelees yet hadde he greet pitee
> That thilke nyght offenden her moste he,
> And thoughte, "Allas! O tendre creature,
> Now wolde God ye myghte wel endure
> Al my corage, it is so sharp and keene!
> I am agast ye shul it nat susteene.
> But God forbede that I dide al my myght!
> (E1755-61)

It is humorous that an expression of tenderness should be so cruel. The remark is not so much an altruistic, loving concern for his new wife as it is an implicit and humorous bit of self-praise. The overweaning nature of his sexual pride makes the reader feel that perhaps he protests too much, but comic deflation awaits May's reaction to similar crowing and subsequent actions which obviously do not measure up to the virility of January's speech, lines

E1821-54. In any case, January's "sympathy" for May does not elicit any similar response from the reader for him.

One might also be tempted to sympathize with the unknowing old man when, upon hearing of Damian's illness, he praises the squire and sends May to console him. Two facts prevent sympathy, however. January's compassion for the sick squire loses all emphasis in the face of the obvious dramatic irony of the passage:

> "He is a gentil squier, by my trouthe!
> If that he deyde, it were harm and routhe.
> He is as wys, discreet, and as secree
> As any man I woot of his degree
> And therto manly, and eek servysable."
> (E1907-11)

One is overwhelmed by the uncomprehending use January makes of the language of courtly love: "discret," "secree," "gentil," and "servysable." From our superior vantage point of comprehension, we can laughingly agree with January's characterization of Damian.[84] It is obvious that the speech is staged by the Merchant for this effect, not any intent to reveal January's warm-hearted humanity. Also, sympathy for January because he incomprehendingly sends May to comfort the squire is undercut by the fact that, as Professor Hartung has recently argued, "the reason that January does not go is, obviously, sexual exhaustion."[85] The burden of the lecher's folly falls once again on the lecher himself. Throughout the tale, even when intimate emotional involvement seems possible

for the reader, Chaucer reasserts the proper distance, just as he does here, by means of the damaging intrusion of January's lustful distortion upon the reader's consciousness. Later, when January goes blind, sympathy is precluded by the appearance of his insane and ridiculous jealousy. When, in the conclusion, he is abused by Damian and May, one cannot feel sorrow for him because, as we have seen, he only continues in his lechery and sexual delusion.

Furthermore, January's actions do not become repugnant for the same reason that May's and Damian's do not. The reader does not respond with serious moral indignation to January's distortion because his actions never really touch our human world of normality; rather he interacts only with the equally distorted, though less fully delineated, lovers. The creation of a world of distortion and the artistically calculated distance from which the reader views that world combine to alter the conventional moral response to character in favor of the derisive laughter bred of superiority.

Of all the criticism which has dealt with the problem of comedy in the Merchant's Tale, only Professor Hartung's recent article explicitly rejects the possibility of caricature comedy. Part of Hartung's conclusion is that Chaucer "wishes to avoid caricature and bring his subject within the range of human credibility, that he wishes to

assign guilt."[86] In the body of Professor Hartung's essay, which treats the problem of caricature only incidentally, he illustrates his assertion only by a comparison of January's nuptial night with its source, Boccaccio's account of love-making in the Ameto.

> "Rejecting the details, bordering on depravity, of the connubial kisses in the Ameto, Chaucer concentrates on one detail, the roughness of January's beard. He gives us a reason for its roughness; January was newly shaved. He ignores the comparison with the quills of the hedgehog in the Ameto, which tends toward the grotesque, and instead gives us as a comparison the skin of a dog shark, which is uglier and rings truer."[87]

Later on, Professor Hartung has this to say:

> "Most striking of all is Chaucer's rejection of details which tend toward the grotesque, for the ultimate effect of Agapes' husband is that he is grotesque. January, in contrast, remains within the realm of human credibility and thus remains a human concern. His lapses are less defensible and our judgment of them is more biting because we recognize their relevance to ourselves."[88]

Here, as in the whole discussion of caricature, there is no intention of denying moral judgment. All great art is ultimately moral; and caricature art could not exist without the implicit standard of normality by which the reader recognizes distortion. In caricature, normality, both of manners and morals, is a donnée, an assumption. The exaggerated nature of the faults and foibles of the characters in the Merchant's Tale makes their guilt transparent. The reader's moral judgment of them is taken for

granted and implicit in the very telling of the tale. It is only for this reason that the creator of caricature comedy can subsume what ordinarily are serious distortions of morality and humanity within the bounds of laughter. With this preface firmly in mind, we may discuss Professor Hartung's contention.

Despite Chaucer's suppression of the erotic detail present in the Ameto (which, after all, is consonant with Chaucer's usual restraint and good taste in such matters) and despite the suppression of other details of the description of Agapes' old husband (which is consonant with the caricaturist's technique of unelaborated description), is it really possible to consider January's actions here a fully "human concern" or to consider "our judgment of them more biting because we recognize their relevance to ourselves"? Whether or not the comparison of January's beard to the skin of the dog shark "rings truer" or is "uglier" than the comparison to the quills of the hedgehog does not make his rubbing May's face with it more human. The description of the sixty year-old man's "slakke skyn" which shakes as he "chaunteth" and "craketh" certainly is meant to suggest a rooster crowing, not a human being in whom we recognize ourselves. We simply cannot take January's actions here with the seriousness of "biting" moral judgment, especially since, as we have seen, May has not as yet been delineated as a human being who feels but

merely as the object of January's lust. Furthermore, the nature of her insensitive reaction to the love-making precludes any real sympathy for her. We remain detached; the scene, as the tale, is created for derisive laughter. The immorality of the action is implicit and transparently obvious.

Combine such caricatured characterization with the pagan, mythological, even slightly fantastic elements in the story, to which Tatlock alludes,[89] and the integration of two artistic conventions into the plot, the fabliau and the parodied courtly romance, both of which are at least somewhat removed from realistic moral judgment, and one realizes that Chaucer was careful to prevent a serious, strictly moralistic response to the tale. It is a comedy whose humor is not the genial, warm-hearted variety characteristic of Chaucer; but, nonetheless, one's response is laughter. Perhaps the greatest artistic achievement of the tale is the creation of comedy which subsumes, but does not ignore, the narrator's bitterness.

Notes

[1]Robert M. Jordan, "The Non-dramatic Disunity of the Merchant's Tale," PMLA, LXXVIII (1963), 293-299; B. H. Bronson, "After-thoughts on The Merchant's Tale," SP, LVIII (1961), 583-596; T. W. Craik, The Comic Tales of Chaucer (London, 1964), p. 137; Kemp Malone, Chapters on Chaucer (Baltimore, 1951), p. 228.

[2]G. L. Kittredge, Chaucer and His Poetry (Cambridge, Mass., 1915), p. 202; J. S. P. Tatlock, "Chaucer's Merchant's Tale," MP, XXXIII (1936), 367; C. Hugh Holman, "Courtly Love in the Merchant's and Franklin's Tales," ELH, XVIII (1951), 241-252 are only a few of those who comment on the tale's bitterness.

[3]Bronson, p. 584.

[4]John M. Manly, Chaucer's Canterbury Tales (New York, 1928), p. 624. Manly felt that the tale was meant for the Monk. "The tale itself can hardly have been composed with the Merchant in mind as narrator--the detached tone of quiet irony is entirely unsuited to the Merchant and contrary to the tone of his Prologue: cf. especially ll. 1267-1390." (p. 596) See G. G. Sedgewick, "The Structure of the Merchant's Tale," UTQ, XVII (1948), p. 340 for comment on Manly's opinion. Albert C. Baugh, "The Original Teller of the Merchant's Tale," MP, XXXV (1937), 15-26 indicates the tale was originally intended for the Friar.

[5]Jordan, p. 298.

[6]See note 4 above.

[7]Baugh, p. 18.

[8]Baugh, p. 19.

[9]Germaine Dempster, "The Original Teller of the Merchant's Tale," MP, XXXVI (1938), p. 4 points out these lines and several others (E1286, 1321, 1331-32, 1338-41, 1350-52, 1361) as patently ironic.

[10]Dempster, p. 4.

[11]Dempster, p. 5. See also E1271, 1281, 1332, 1356-57 for the same sort of foreshadowing.

[12]This fact was first pointed out by Germaine Dempster, Dramatic Irony in Chaucer (Stanford University, 1932), p. 49.

[13]Dempster, "Original Teller," pp. 1-2.

[14]John C. McGalliard, "Chaucer's Merchant's Tale and Deschamp's Miroir de Mariage," PQ, XXV (1946), p. 194.

[15]McGalliard, "Chaucer's Merchant's Tale," pp. 195-96.

[16]Dempster, "Original Teller," p. 6.

[17]See A3227 and H344-345. Citations here and else-

where in the text from Chaucer are to The Complete Works, ed. Fred N. Robinson (Cambridge, Mass., 1957).

[18]Physician (C72-104); Franklin (F761-790); Manciple (H207-237).

[19]Dempster, "Original Teller," p. 7.

[20]Baugh, p. 23.

[21]J. S. P. Tatlock, "The Canterbury Tales in 1400," PMLA, L (1935), p. 130.

[22]The vast majority of Chaucerians, including most textual scholars, second Tatlock's views on this subject: Robert Pratt, "The Order of the Canterbury Tales," PMLA, LXVI (1951), p. 1142; J. M. Manly and Edith Rickert, The Text of the Canterbury Tales (Chicago, 1940), II, p. 489; Germaine Dempster, "The Fifteenth-Century Editors of the Canterbury Tales and the Problem of Tale Order," PMLA, LXIV (1949), p. 1124. Carleton Brown, "The Evolution of the Canterbury 'Marriage Group,'" PMLA, XLVIII (1933), pp. 1041-1059 upon whom Baugh depends, dissents.

[23]See E1213 and E1226.

[24]Bronson, p. 585.

[25]R. D. French, A Chaucer Handbook (New York, 1947), pp. 313-314. Germaine Dempster, "A Period in the Develop-

ment of the Canterbury Tales Marriage Group and of Blocks B^2 and C," PMLA, LXVIII (1953), pp. 1143-1147 gives several other reasons why it is likely that the Host's stanza was meant to be dropped.

[26]J. B. Severs, "Did Chaucer Rearrange the Clerk's Envoy?" MLN, LXIX (1954), 472-478. Severs shows that the Envoy was not revised. The "weeping and wailing" line always concluded the poem. Variants in the manuscripts are scribal.

[27]Dempster, "B^2 and C," p. 1147.

[28]John Elliott, "The Two Tellers of the Merchant's Tale," TSL, IX (1964), p. 13.

[29]Sedgewick, p. 341.

[30]G. L. Kittredge, "Chaucer's Discussion of Marriage," MP, IX (1911-1912), 435-467. See especially E1682-1688; the direct reference to Alice indicates that he has both her and her tale in mind.

[31]Compare D226-233 with E2265-2275.

[32]Compare D112 with E1456.

[33]Compare D486-490 with E1668-1673.

[34]As we saw earlier, Baugh believed that the tale previously belonged before that of the Wife of Bath, and

Jordan used that theory to cast doubt on the relevance of its present place in the dramatic context.

[35]It is interesting to note that the Merchant's place in both the order of the tales and in the dramatic discussion of marriage is reinforced by the same structural reasoning in comparing the Merchant's Tale to the Franklin's Tale. C. Hugh Holman, "Courtly Love in the Merchant's and Franklin's Tales," ELH, XVIII (1951), p. 242 has enumerated the many structural similarities between the two tales. The same antithetical parallelism exists between the Franklin's Tale and the Merchant's Tale as does between the latter and the Clerk's Tale; but the Franklin, unlike the Merchant, elevates the picture of love and marriage by the use of significant character difference within the parallel situation.

[36]Jordan, p. 294.

[37]Jordan, p. 293.

[38]Jordan, pp. 295-296.

[39]J. S. P. Tatlock, "Chaucer's Merchant's Tale," MP, XXXIII (1935), p. 370.

[40]J. B. Severs, "Appropriateness of Character to Plot in the 'Franklin's Tale,'" in Studies in Language and Literature in Honor of Margaret Schlauch, eds. Brahmer et al. (Warsawa, 1966), p. 387.

[41]John C. McGalliard, "Chaucerian Comedy: The Merchant's Tale, Jonson, and Molière," PQ, XXV (1946), p. 349.

[42]Tatlock, "Chaucer's Merchant's Tale," pp. 374-375 concurs.

[43]Dempster, Dramatic Irony, p. 49.

[44]E1493-1505.

[45]The analysis of the type of comedy is McGalliard's in "Chaucerian Comedy . . . ," pp. 348-349. R. K. Root, The Poetry of Chaucer (Boston, 1926), pp. 265-266 also likens the tale to Jonsonian comedy.

[46]J. A. Burrow, "Irony in the Merchant's Tale," Anglia, LXXV (1957), p. 203; Tatlock, "Chaucer's Merchant's Tale," p. 369; Sedgewick, p. 341; Severs, "Appropriateness . . . ," p. 387.

[47]Jordan, p. 294.

[48]Dempster, Dramatic Irony, pp. 46-57; C. A. Owen, "The Crucial Passages in Five of the Canterbury Tales: A Study in Irony and Symbol," JEGP, LII (1953), pp. 297-301; Milton Miller, "Heir in the Merchant's Tale," PQ, XXIX (1950), pp. 437-440 are probably the most intensive studies of dramatic irony.

[49]Jordan speaks as if dramatic irony should be

justified in terms of the narrator. Obviously when we speak of dramatic irony in the tale we must deal with the characters in the story, most probably January, not the Merchant-narrator.

[50]Jordan, p. 295.

[51]Margaret Schlauch, "Chaucer's Merchant's Tale and Courtly Love," ELH, IV (1937), p. 207.

[52]Schlauch, pp. 209-210.

[53]Miller's Tale, Wife of Bath's Tale, Franklin's Tale. On the satire or transcendence in these tales see F. Coffman, "Chaucer and Courtly Love Once More," Speculum, XX (1945), 443-450 on WBT; E. T. Donaldson, "The Idiom of Popular Poetry in the Miller's Tale," English Institute Essays, II (1950), 118-140; Janet Boothman, "'Who hath no wyf, he is no cokewold': A Study of John and January in Chaucer's Miller's and Merchant's Tales," THOTH, IV (1963), pp. 8-9; C. Hugh Holman, "Courtly Love in the Merchant's and Franklin's Tales," ELH, XVIII (1951), 241-252.

[54]All the critics who have studied the tale from the point of view of courtly convention (Holman, Schlauch, Boothman) have found a debased situation. January merits little better than scorn from the beginning of the tale, since he is more lecher than knight. May, though hardly emphasized, rates little better when, contrary to the

courtly code, she accedes immediately to Damian's wishes. Damian, as Boothman puts it, "lolls about the Merchant's Tale like a slothful adolescent." He is more effete dandy than courtly lover. In short, the attitude toward all the characters and even toward the love situation itself, epitomized in the repeated scatalogical pun on the word "privy," is one of disgust. The tone of the romance section is disillusioned and bitter.

[55]Jordan, p. 298.

[56]Karl P. Wentersdorf, "Theme and Structure in the Merchant's Tale: The Function of the Pluto Episode," PMLA, LXXX (1965), p. 524.

[57]Robert Pratt, "Chaucer's Claudian," Speculum, XXII (1947), p. 426 confirms Chaucer's familiarity with Claudian's account.

[58]Mortimer Donovan, "The Image of Pluto and Proserpine in the Merchant's Tale," PQ, XXXVI (1957), p. 51. The parallelisms I point out are all ffom Donovan.

[59]Though the Merchant mentions that he does not know whether "hoolynesse or dotage" prompted January to marry, E1788 indicates the Merchant's real feelings about January's motivation.

[60]Sedgewick, p. 343.

[61]Parson's Tale (I 942) indicates the Church's stand on such matters.

[62]Wentersdorf, p. 527.

[63]Jordan, p. 298.

[64]Jordan, p. 296. All three quotations cited at this point are from the same page in Jordan's article.

[65]George B. Pace, "The Scorpion of Chaucer's Merchant's Tale," MLQ, XXVI (1965), 369-374.

[66]Jordan, p. 298.

[67]J. S. P. Tatlock, "Boccaccio and the Plan of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales," Anglia, XXXVII (1913), 104-105.

[68]Albert E. Hartung, "The Non-Comic Merchant's Tale, Maximianus, and the Sources," MS, XXIX (1967), 19.

[69]Hartung, p. 19, agrees.

[70]See Note 2 above.

[71]McGalliard, "Chaucerian Comedy . . . ," p. 354.

[72]Tatlock, "Chaucer's Merchant's Tale," p. 368.

[73]These arguments appear in Jordan's article on pp. 295-296.

[74]Jordan, p. 296.

[75]Tatlock, "Chaucer's Merchant's Tale," p. 367.

[76]Tatlock, "Chaucer's Merchant's Tale," p. 381.

[77]Holman, p. 246.

[78]See Tatlock, "Chaucer's Merchant's Tale," pp. 370-71 and Boothman, p. 9, for corroboration.

[79]Holman, pp. 246-247.

[80]Tatlock, "Chaucer's Merchant's Tale," p. 371.

[81]McGalliard, "Chaucerian Comedy . . . ," pp. 365-67, reads January's speech in the garden as sincere.

[82]Dempster, Dramatic Irony, p. 57.

[83]See the text, pp. 19-21.

[84]Dempster, Dramatic Irony, p. 55, sees the scene as high comedy.

[85]Hartung, p. 23.

[86]Hartung, p. 25.

[87]Hartung, p. 20.

[88]Hartung, pp. 20-21.

[89]Tatlock, "Chaucer's Merchant's Tale," pp. 376-77.

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